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ABSTRACT

In this study, two dimensions of political decisional agenda (the elements which relate most to voting decisions) were examined: the number of items on the agenda and the content of the agenda items. Data were gathered in a study of the 1974 congressional election in the five largest counties of Illinois' 24th Congressional District. A total of 141 respondents were interviewed by telephone from September 14 to September 21 and from October 26 to November 4. Results, gained from an analysis of answers to four questions, show that early in the campaign the decided voter constructs a decisional agenda composed of likes and dislikes about the candidate, while the undecided voter is just beginning to construct lists; and that over a period of time the decided voter accumulates more of the same kind of information, while the undecided voter samples a variety of issues, not accumulating much additional decisional information. (JM)

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PRE AND POST-DECISIONAL AGENDA:

CAMPAIGN '74

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PRE AND POST-DECISIONAL AGENDA:

CAMPAIGN '74

Introduction

The agenda-setting model of media effects has only recently caught the attention of communication researchers. Since 1968 when McCombs and Shaw (1972) conducted the initial agenda-setting study, over thirty such studies have been conducted (McCombs, 1976). Several of these studies have focused on the contingent conditions which may mediate the agenda-setting function of political messages.

While there is little evidence relevant to the effects of the informational agenda on voting behavior, Kelley and Mirer (1974) found that the decision for whom an individual will vote is highly predictable from a comparison of the things which voters like and dislike about candidates and political parties. Calculations derived from the frequencies of likes and dislikes predicted voting decisions in an impressive 84.4 per cent of the cases, on the average across four Presidential elections.

Sanders and Atwood (1975) labeled these lists of likes

and dislikes "decisional agenda" because they appear to constitute the elements in cognitive and affective space which relate most to voting decisions. They argued that the individual uses information from the mass media to help construct the decisional agenda, and that the decisional agenda is predictive of voting behavior. They accurately predicted voting behavior for an average of 88 per cent of voters in a Congressional Election in one group across two points in time. Benton and Frazier (1975) argued that pro-con rationales comprise one of three levels of agenda-setting, the other two being general issue labels and sub-issues.

In the present study, two dimensions of the decisional agenda were examined. They were the number of items on the agenda and the content of agenda items. Consideration of the former dimension is important to the development of the agenda-setting model. It is on the issue of agenda size that a major departure from the Law of Minimal Consequences (Klapper, 1960) is found. The Law posits that the effects of campaign communication will be minimal due to mediating factors. In concert with this view, traditional prediction of voting behavior has been based mainly on an agenda containing one issue, that of party affiliation. The agenda-setting viewpoint suggests that as the individual moves closer to the point of decision, he tends to fill in more and more of his cognitive map. Given a fixed point of

final decision, i.e. election day, the individual strives to feel as comfortable as possible with his decision.

Clearly, the individual does not immediately assimilate every bit of political information which the media transmit. At any given point in time, the decisional agenda of various individuals could be in different stages of development. It is necessary to examine the content of agenda at different points in time to explain the movement of the individual toward a decision.

In examining the electoral decision process from an agenda standpoint, this study conceptualized the agenda of undecided voters as the "pre-decisional agenda," while that of decided voters was viewed as the "post-decisional agenda."

Agenda early in the campaign. The agenda notion suggests that the individual strives to base the decision for whom to vote on what he feels is a relatively complete map of the environment. It would be expected then, that even early in the campaign those individuals who have made-up their minds will exhibit a more complete agenda than those individuals who have not yet made-up their minds. To verify this assertion, the following two hypotheses were constructed:

HYPOTHESIS 1. The number of items on the post-decisional agenda early in the campaign will be significantly greater than the number of items on the pre-decisional agenda early in the campaign.

HYPOTHESIS 2. The content of the post-decisional agenda early in the campaign will differ significantly from the content of the pre-decisional agenda early in the campaign.

Agenda late in the campaign. Late in the campaign the relationship between decided and undecided voters is probably very much the same as it was early in the campaign. The decided voter utilizes an agenda which is different in size and content from the agenda of undecided voters. In spite of the probability that there is more information in the overall environment one week before the election than there was one month before, the relationship between agenda of undecided voters and decided voters should remain constant as suggested in Hypotheses 3 and 4.

HYPOTHESIS 3. The number of items on the post-decisional agenda late in the campaign will be significantly greater than the number of items on the pre-decisional agenda late in the campaign.

HYPOTHESIS 4. The content of the post-decisional agenda late in the campaign will differ significantly from the content of the pre-decisional agenda late in the campaign.

Pre-decisional agenda over time. What differences are there between the agenda of undecided voters early in the campaign and the agenda of undecided voters late in the campaign? An examination of the environment of political decision making calls to mind one difference immediately. As the campaign draws to a close, and the point of decision

is nearing, more and more information from the candidates and media is poured into the environment. We expected then that even the undecided voter would have accumulated more bits of information as a result of interacting with that environment. McCombs and Weaver (1973) suggested that those for whom politics is not a very major concern would behave toward the media in a manner consistent with the Law of Minimal Consequences. Kelly and Mirer (1974) suggested alternatively that the agenda of undecided voters could be quite large, but that the items were of a nature which results in a null decision. With regard to the content of the agenda for undecided voters, we hypothesized no significant difference between the agenda one month before the election and the agenda during the week before the election. This suggests that the individual expands his lists of pros and cons about candidates based on the issues that were important initially.

HYPOTHESIS 5. The number of items on the pre-decisional agenda late in the campaign will be significantly greater than the number of items on the pre-decisional agenda early in the campaign.

HYPOTHESIS 6. The content of the pre-decisional agenda late in the campaign will not differ significantly from the content of the pre-decisional agenda early in the campaign.

Post-decisional agenda over time. In an effort to determine the compositional changes in the agenda of decided voters for the time period between their decision and the

actual casting of the ballot, the post-decisional agenda was examined over two points in time. Because of the increased volume of information in the environment, we suggested an increase in the number of items on the agenda late in the campaign. The notion that individuals who have reached a decision might tend to follow the media in seeking conformational information, and thus have a decisional agenda that is quite different by election day, prompted the hypothesis of significant differences between early and late campaign content.

HYPOTHESIS 7. The number of items on the post-decisional agenda late in the campaign will be significantly greater than the number of items on the post-decisional agenda early in the campaign.

HYPOTHESIS 8. The content of the post-decisional agenda late in the campaign will differ significantly from the content of the post-decisional agenda early in the campaign.

Procedures

The data used in this study were gathered in a study of the 1974 Congressional Election in the five largest counties of the 24th Congressional District of Illinois. The sample was selected as follows:

> The population was defined as all individuals residing in Jackson, Williamson, Saline, Franklin, and Jefferson counties who intended to vote in the Congressional election, and whose household had a listed telephone. The population was stratified by county, proportionately.

It was determined that a random, stratified sample of 500 would be adequate for the study. The sample was stratified by county relative to the proportions established for the population.

The sample was then selected from the telephone directories of each using a skip interval in column inches that would result in the appropriate stratification.

Of the total sample, 141 respondents were interviewed on both waves. Wave one (early campaign) was conducted from September 14 to September 21 and Wave two (late campaign) from October 26 to November 4. Of the questions asked in the telephone survey, only four were analyzed in this study. They are:

1. Is there anything in particular about Paul Simon (the Democratic candidate for Congress) that might make you want to vote for him?

2. Is there anything in particular about Paul Simon that might make you want to vote against him?

3. Is there anything in particular about Val Oshel (the Republican candidate for Congress) that might make you want to vote for him?

4. Is ther anything in particular about Val Oshel that might make you want to vote against him?

Interviewers trained by the Center for Communication Research at Southern Illinois University conducted the telephone interviews, and were instructed to probe the respondents for a maximum of four responses, if possible, for each question.

The data obtained from these questions were content analyzed in terms of fifteen general content categories developed out of the total data set. Inter-rater reliability was relatively high ($r_s = .81$).

Four aspects of agenda-setting were examined in this study. Pre and post-decisional agenda were compared early in the campaign and late in the campaign; pre-decisional agenda early in the campaign was compared with pre-decisional agenda late in the campaign; and post-decisional agenda early in the campaign was compared with post-decisional agenda late in the campaign. Three methods of statistical analysis were employed in testing the hypotheses of this study. T-tests were used to compare the mean number of agenda items for decided and undecided voters early in the campaign and decided versus undecided voters late in the campaign. Chi Squares were used to compare the frequency of agenda items for decided voters early in the campaign versus decided voters late in the campaign and undecided voters early in the campaign versus undecided voters late in the campaign.

The test for differences in agenda content consisted of correlations between each of the pairs of agenda hypothesized. That is, the response frequency for each of the fifteen content categories for the first group was correlated (using Kendall's Tau) with the response frequency of each category for the second group in each hypothesis. A

significantly high correlation required the acceptance of the null hypothesis that no differences existed between the groups tested.

Results

Agenda early in the campaign. Utilizing independent samples it was found that the number of items on the post-decisional agenda early in the campaign is significantly greater than the number of items on the pre-decisional agenda early in the campaign ($p < .05$, see Table 1).

Insert table 1 here

In the test for agenda content similarity, the correlation between post-decisional agenda early in the campaign and the pre-decisional agenda early in the campaign was nonsignificant (Tau = .447), confirming Hypothesis 2, that a difference exists between pre-decisional and post-decisional agenda early in the campaign.

As expected, one month before election day, rather early in the congressional campaign, the voters apparently demonstrate a dependence upon frequency and diversity of information in making up their minds for whom to vote. Decided voters utilize an agenda which is larger and different in content from the agenda of those who have as

yet not decided about their choice of candidate.

Agenda late in the campaign. The t-test indicate significant difference between pre and post-decisional agenda one week before the election ($p < .05$, see Table 2), with the post-decisional agenda containing significantly more items.

Insert table 2 here

Hypothesis 4 was not confirmed. A significant correlation was obtained between the content of the pre-decisional agenda late in the campaign and the content of the post-decisional agenda late in the campaign (Tau = .704).

The results of this analysis suggests that as the election draws near, the things which concern undecided voters tend to be the same as the things which concern decided voters, however the decided voters appear to hold more information items about those things.

Pre-decisional agenda over time. In this analysis, both hypotheses were rejected (see Table 3).

Insert table 3 here

These findings suggest that the undecided voter is much more active in his decisional behavior than had been previously realized. The number of items on the agenda did not change

drastically over time, but the content of the agenda did change, suggesting that the undecided voters in this analysis were engaged in a broad sweep of the information in the environment, never dealing with very much information about any one thing (Tau = .314).

Post-decisional agenda over time. Hypothesis 7, indicated a greater number of items on the agenda late in the campaign than early in the campaign for decided voters ($p < .05$, see Table 4). However, in testing Hypothesis 8, a high correlation between the content of the post-decisional agenda early in the campaign and the content of the post-decisional agenda at time two was found (Tau = .808).

Insert table 4 here

This suggests that those voters who have decided, tend to continue to construct their agenda, but limit the agenda to those items dealing with the content similiar to that upon which the decision was initially based.

Summary and Discussion

The findings presented here are suggestive of some interesting generalizations about the electoral decision process. Using the results of this study, let us construct a comparison of generalized decisional behavior for decided and undecided voters over time.

Early in the campaign, the decided voter has constructed for himself a decisional agenda composed of likes and dislikes about the candidates. At the same point in time, the undecided voter is just beginning to construct these lists, and his lists differ from those of the decided voter in both number and content of items. Over time, the decided voter accumulates more and more information about the candidates but rarely deviates from the content structure already established in his decisional agenda. In other words, he seeks out more of the same kinds of information. Later in the campaign the undecided voter has also expanded his agenda but in a manner that is the reverse of the decided voter. Rather than seeking more items of the same kind of information, the undecided voter seems to be sampling the content of a variety of issues while not accumulating in total much additional decisional information at all. It is interesting to note that there is some convergence between decided and undecided voters in terms of agenda content over time. That is, late in the campaign the undecided voter has an agenda which is very similar to that of the decided voter, but because he has been "trying on" different issues throughout the campaign, the undecided voter has less total information items about those issues.

In summary, the present study has attempted to explain the differences between the decisional agenda of decided and undecided voters over time. Different patterns of electoral

decision behavior were examined, and the differences between agenda determined. Further research into the areas of decisional agenda over time, the relationship between the media agenda and the decisional agenda, and information seeking among decided and undecided voters is suggested.

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TABLE 1

Pre and Post Decisional Agenda
Early in the Campaign

pre-decisional agenda	post-decisional agenda	std. error	df	t-value
1.54	2.91	.45	133	3.133
				p<.05

TABLE 2

Pre and Post Decisional Agenda
Late in the Campaign

pre-decisional agenda	post-decisional agenda	std. error	df	t-value
2.54	4.16	.47	133	3.45
				p<.05

TABLE 3

Pre Decisional Agenda Over Time

no. of items X	early f	early fx	late f	late fx	total f	total fx
0	23	0	5	0	28	0
1-2	11	18	11	23	22	41
3-5	12	42	9	35	21	77
6-8	2	14	4	26	6	40
totals	48	74	33	84	77	158

Chi Square = 37.49 $p>.05$

TABLE 4

Post Decisional Agenda Over Time

no. of items x	early f	early fx	late f	late fx	total f	total fx
0	15	0	2	0	7	0
1-2	30	44	27	41	57	85
3-5	23	85	43	166	66	251
6-8	15	102	27	186	42	288
9-14	4	44	3	32	7	76
totals	87	275	102	425	179	700

Chi Square = 221.87 $p<.05$